



Do the conjugal representations change after the arrival of the first child?

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the couple's (marital) functioning and its evolution during the transition to parenthood. Every couple elaborates gradually a way of being in the world and with each other, corresponding to the couple's identity. Our aim is to study these representations in the context of the arrival of a first child.

Research questions

- ❖ Is there a continuum in the couple's identity during the transition to parenthood? Does the couple's identity at the beginning of their relationship stays the same after the arrival of the first child?
- ❖ Can we compare the consequences of a birth crisis with the ones of the « desidealisation crisis » (Lemaire, 1979) which occurs in every couple?
- ❖ From a gender perspective, do partners evolve in the same direction during the transition to parenthood? Is there any differences between men and women concerning their perception of the personal and marital reorganization induced by the arrival of a first child?

Method

Sample

The sample includes 50 couples, divided in two groups:

Group 1 (G1): 25 couples with a first child aged from 9 to 12 months.

Group 2 (G2): 25 couples without children, living together since at least 3 years.

All these couples were recruited into the general population and have participated on a voluntary basis.

Research instruments

The main instruments for this research are inspired of the « family blazon » (Caillé & Rey, 2004) which explores the participants' family's relations through objects, words or events.

During the interview, the partners had to relate their relation by means of **values** and **sayings**.

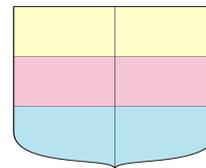
Concretely, two instruments have been develop for this research:

- ❖ The « free blazon »
- ❖ The questionnaire with prebuilt values and sayings

The free blazon

The partners have to find one value and one saying to describe each three situations:

- **S1**: Their marital relationship, in the first months of their love story
- **S2**: Their current marital relationship
- **S3**: Their current family relationship (father-mother-infant). *Only for Group 1.*



The questionnaire

The partners completed **individually** a questionnaire that evaluates, through 32 prebuilt values and sayings, the three situations described above.

This questionnaire is presented with 6 points Likert scales to assess their personal level of agreement.

Results

Based on the questionnaire, an **exploratory factor analysis** (n=100) has put forward five principal factors, which correspond to

- ❖ **F1**: The place of the child / the place of the project of child. How the couple does perceive the child: like a danger or like a source of conjugal blooming?
- ❖ **F2**: The conjugal openness: to the world and to the changes. Are the changes and the extern influence perceived by the couple like a threat or a ressource?
- ❖ **F3**: The fusion. Does the conjugal happiness necessitate ideas' and activities' symbiosis?
- ❖ **F4**: The couple as a source of security and alliance. Do solidarity and trust describe the marital's relationship?
- ❖ **F5**: The independance: of each partner within the couple. Within the couple, which place is there for each individuality?

Student tests - a few results

F3: S1 vs S2. For each group, the fusion reduces significantly with time. For G1, participants experienced greater fusion at the beginning of their relation ($M=52.27$, $SE=1.71$) than a few years later ($M=49.38$, $SE=1.48$), $t(43)=2.5$, $p<.05$, $d=.38$. For G2, the results are ($M=51.07$, $SE=1.45$) for S1, and ($M=46.97$, $SE=1.26$) for S2, $t(44)=4.34$, $p<.05$, $d=.65$. Diminution of fusion is therefore greater for G2 than for G1.

F4: S1 vs S2. For each group, F4 significantly increases with time. For G1, the results are ($M=44.20$, $SE=1.32$) for S1, and ($M=48.23$, $SE=1.54$) for S2, $t(43)=-2.08$, $p<.05$, $d=.32$. For G2, the results are ($M=48.33$, $SE=1.40$) for S1, and ($M=56.42$, $SE=1.44$) for S2, $t(44)=-4.19$, $p<.05$, $d=.63$.

Discussion

Relating to fusion, our results contradict the idea that the arrival of a child involves a diminution of the fusion between the two partners. Indeed, G1 and G2 relate a significant diminution of fusion. Just the opposite, security and alliance within the couple increase for the two groups. Describing their current marital relationship, participants without children perceive greater security and alliance than participants with a child.

Références